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Critique and Change in Canadian New Play Development: Examining a Cultural Discourse and Edmonton's Playwrights Garage

by

Sarah Colleen Polkinghorne

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Abstract

This thesis explores current Canadian New Play Development as a discourse according to specific characteristics: rhetoric, vocabulary, ideology, objectives, internal roles and power relations, and relationships to cultural institutions. The author explores the implications of Canadian New Play Development's evolution from a largely unstructured, inclusive movement into an institutionalized discourse that often acts as a gatekeeper between new Canadian plays and our stages.

The author then examines a successful playwright development program that was designed in response to the discourse's current status quo. Edmonton's Playwrights Garage program emerged in response to a dearth of local playwright development opportunities. The Garage — which operated in affiliation with Workshop West Theatre between 2001 and 2004 — emphasizes the importance of playwrights' professional skills as well as their knowledge of the art and craft of playwriting.

This thesis concludes that emphasis on playwright development, not merely play development, is necessary if the discourse of New Play Development is to evolve in an manner that can respond to the diverse needs of emerging Canadian playwrights.

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Critique and Change in Canadian New Play Development: Examining a Cultural Discourse and Edmonton's Playwrights Garage

CHAPTER ONE

Introductory Notes

I begin with a nod to two graduate theses that were an important part of my reading in preparing this thesis: Deborah Tihanyi's "New Play Development in English Canada, 1970-1990: Defining the Dramaturgical Role," completed in 1994; and William Kerr's "Play(s) in the Workshop: An Examination of the Participants' (Players') Roles in the New Play Workshop," completed in 1995. My thesis generally addresses the same field: contemporary Canadian New Play Development (NPD). However, I have taken a notably different approach to the subject matter. Recognizing the challenge of positioning her work within the still-evolving field of NPD, Tihanyi introduced her thesis by defining what it was not. This is a method that I have also found useful.

My thesis does not consist primarily of a compilation of interviews held with Canadian New Play Development professionals, as did both Tihanyi's and Kerr's theses. I appreciate this approach, and I respect the labour it entails. However, historically, in the body of literature surrounding Canadian New Play Development, there has been a proliferation of this type of interview-based reflective work. The most recent notable example is 2002's

Between the Lines: The Process of Dramaturgy, edited by Judith Rudakoff and Lynn M. Thomson, upon which I have also relied. The interview-based approach has been important because, as Tihanyi notes, "[...] the richest source of information — those theatre professionals actually involved in the process — has gone, for the most part, undocumented" ("New Play Development" 1-2). Works of "oral history," such as Tihanyi's thesis (1), have addressed this lack of documentation and paved the way for investigations that go beyond descriptions of beliefs and experiences. In my opinion, now is the time for a new approach to the examination of Canadian NPD. My primary research objectives have been to problematize and to critique NPD, rather than to record or to collect. I believe that my objectives are best served by a different methodology, combining oral history with other resources.[1] I will detail my methods later in this introduction.

My concern with conventional oral history, as seen in the examples noted above, is the compiler/interviewer's tendency to assume an uncritical position, which may be beneficial from an anthropological standpoint, but not necessarily from an interrogative one. Within such a polarizing field as NPD, the compiler/interviewer can easily, and unintentionally, become complicit in repeating the assumptions and opinions of the interviewees. The compiler/interviewer may appear to escape the pitfalls of generalization and essentialism — the central challenge for this discussion — while publishing

[1] Tihanyi's own work on Canadian New Play Dramaturgy has also evolved far beyond oral history, as demonstrated in her 2002 University of Nottingham conference paper entitled "Exploding the Boundaries of Discourse: Articulating Dramaturgical Communication."

others' generalizing or essentializing statements and allowing them to remain unexamined. For example, on the subject of NPD dramaturgy, Tihanyi quotes director Bob White saying that "We invented [it] — my generation of people more or less invented it: we said — as I did — that we're going to do this job. [...] It's very accidental [...]" ("New Play Development" 13). While quotable, White's statement reveals a simple but conflicted view of history: he takes credit for the "invention" of NPD, while also suggesting it was "accidental." This statement would seem to demand further questions — such as "Who exactly is the 'we' who invented NPD?" — but Tihanyi does not go on to address or contextualize this statement.

If there is one generalization that might be accepted here, it is this: that people, including NPD practitioners, are complex, and the work done and the issues discussed within the NPD discourse are complex, so it is no surprise that many contradictory and under-examined statements can be found in the body of NPD literature. The resulting question is, at what point will Canadian NPD become an area of study that can truly be examined critically, according to commonly-held vocabulary, objectives, practices, and concerns? The oral history of NPD embodies a fundamental paradox, a tension between two constant assumptions, neither of which is necessarily false or useless.

First, some NPD practitioners often suggest that NPD cannot, or should not, be described in general terms; as dramaturg Liz Grieve says, "Every workshop is structured differently: depending on the play, depending on the time, depending on the stage of the play" (qtd. in Kerr 1). At the same time,

NPD practitioners often discuss their projects and field of work as if they were discussing a formalized system: they consider certain practices and programs as routine, and many wonder why, as prominent practitioner Don Kugler has said, "all these developmental programs look so much the same – the playwrights unit, the pre-scheduled reading or workshop festival, etc" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.). NPD practitioners hold common concerns and frustrations, and, perhaps most importantly, they share a specialized language unique to the discourse of New Play Development. This is what Tihanyi refers to as "a highly charged shorthand that evokes a broad range of theatrical experience" ("Exploding the Boundaries" 74). Further, "Embedded within such shorthand are a host of theatrical knowledges and events [...] [it] allows for a more economical discourse" ("Exploding the Boundaries" 74-75). For example, if we examine practitioners' use of the term "workshop," we see that if removed from its NPD context, it could refer to a variety of different events. However, among users of NPD shorthand, "workshop" refers to an event that has a specific and generally accepted structure and objectives. NPD practitioners can discuss a workshop and know that they are all discussing the same type of event.

In other words, each development event is unique, but at the same time, such events share significant commonalities that allow them to become both more meaningful and more efficient. Within the context of my work here, I am interested in pursuing the means by which we can discuss these commonalities, while recognizing and respecting the individuality of specific

practitioners and practices. NPD has become a tradition in Canada, a movement tied integrally to the long-term project of developing a national dramatic literature, and I would not suggest that it be dismantled or dismissed. However, in the process of becoming a tradition, NPD has taken on the characteristics of a system, and, as I will argue in Chapter Two, a dominant cultural discourse. My efforts here are based on the belief that it must be possible to critique NPD in general terms, while simultaneously acknowledging the value and integrity of individual development efforts. This makes for a fine balance, but to ignore the general and insist solely on the specific would be to overlook the real-life, systemic conditions that playwrights encounter in the current world of NPD.

I am most concerned for today's generation of emerging playwrights. My own experiences as a new NPD participant have left me with an awareness of the ways in which the subtle dynamic of the workshop scenario can be affected not only by role designations such as "playwright" and "director," but also by other unacknowledged considerations such as the relative age, experience, reputation, and confidence levels of the different participants. These considerations are part of the unique tone of each development event, but they are also the product of a "generation gap" within the NPD sphere. During the Canadian theatre renaissance of the 1970s, there was a widespread "call for indigenous scripts," a desire among Canadians to see their own peoples and landscapes represented on stage (Mendenhall 26). Emerging theatre practitioners were swept up in the rush to create new Canadian work

in reaction to prevailing British and American theatrical influences. These exciting times generated the NPD practices and organizations that we today describe as being part of a tradition. However, as Kugler makes plain, there is an uncomfortable possibility that "In Canada, the 'radical' activity of the '70s — largely collective creation, and eventually development of Canadian playwrights — has now become institutionalized" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.). He goes on to point out that:

> The broadly defined, but narrowly understood, Canadian Creation criteria for Canada Council funding has resulted in such a proliferation of development programs that virtually every theatre receiving operating funding has now incorporated a structure for new play development — even Stratford. (n. pag.)

In other words, the "generation gap" to which I refer is not one of youth rebelling against age. It is one in which the "radical activity" of the 1970s is juxtaposed with the proliferation of NPD institutions into the early 21st century.

Judith Rudakoff describes the ambience of the 1970s:

> The tone of the times was inclusive rather than exclusive, and allowed for competition and difference as a positive feature fuelling a burgeoning, healthy theatre ecology. It was all so new that there was room for everything. The judgmental, critical times came much later on. (Between the Lines 142)

There may be an element of nostalgia in Rudakoff's statement. However, the recorded history of the movement echoes her distinction between NPD then and NPD now, and furthermore, this distinction is embodied by practitioners who were themselves emerging artists in the 1970s and are now leaders within the present system. NPD practitioners have worked for decades first to establish and then to maintain the organizations and resources that they have now.

Many practitioners from the early boom of Canadian NPD remain active in development work, but its most common practices are no longer new. In the 1970s, emerging playwrights took part in a movement in which play development seemed fresh and innovative. Today, emerging playwrights enter a system that is established and seen as largely normalized. Given that NPD purportedly exists to support playwrights, I have three significant questions:

1. How does the position of playwrights entering the NPD sphere now differ from that of emerging playwrights in the 1970s?
2. What are the implications of this difference to today's young playwrights?
3. How can today's NPD movement address these implications?

I begin to explore these three questions in Chapter Two. My methodology is based in discourse analysis theory, primarily as articulated first by Michel Foucault and later by Diane Macdonell. My tactic in Chapter Two has been first to accept NPD as a cultural discourse, then to examine it

through this critical framework. NPD possesses the characteristics of a discourse. It displays objectives based on underlying values and assumptions. It functions in relation to identifiable cultural institutions, principally Canadian theatres. It prescribes roles and relationships for the individuals participating in it. Its participants have developed a specific and identifiable internal mode of communication. Finally, we can clearly trace NPD's evolution according to its position relative to other discourses. In the beginning, it was a resistance movement with a decidedly nationalist agenda, bringing Canadian stories and landscapes to the stage in the face of dominant American and British theatrical influences. Now, thirty years later, NPD has replaced these influences by becoming the dominant discourse, and its practices and practitioners have become the gatekeepers between new Canadian plays and our stages.

Now that NPD is the norm, we might logically ask what might arise next in resistance to it. Nevertheless, NPD as it functions today is still extremely valuable, and is still part of the ongoing nationalist struggle in Canada. Suggesting that it should be replaced by a different system is a hypothetical and fruitless argument, since it neither acknowledges the value of the current system, nor addresses the problematic assumptions underpinning it. I will not make such a revolutionary argument here. Still, after making a legitimate critique of NPD, we ask "what next?," since we recognize that such a critique alone is inadequate. It is not action, nor does it necessarily lead to action. How, then, can positive change grow out of a theoretical critique?

Rather than hypothesize about the potential future of NPD, I sought and identified an existing playwright development program that manages both to embody critique and to create conditions by which playwrights can effect change within today's NPD discourse.

Chapter Three examines such a program, the Playwrights Garage, which was operated by Workshop West Theatre and coordinated by playwright Vern Thiessen between 2001 and 2004. For this chapter I have chosen to rely on a methodology that combines oral history with my own observations and analysis of the Garage program, in which I participated as an auditor during its final (2003-2004) season. I attended regular Garage classroom sessions and participated in writing exercises. I was also granted access to all rehearsals leading up to the Kaboom Festival readings that served as the culmination of the Garage experience.

The Playwrights Garage program provides a rigorous educational model combining three areas — training, mentorship, and staged reading — into a comprehensive playwright development program. Playwrights develop their work, they develop their playwriting skills, and they develop the professional tools and knowledge they need to see their plays fully and professionally staged. The Garage was founded from a critique: facilitator Vern Thiessen's frustrations, as a professional playwright, with the shortcomings of contemporary NPD. The Garage embodies Thiessen's criticisms and his view that emerging playwrights need more than playwriting skills to represent their work within the NPD environment. Thiessen notes:

"Any talk of new play dramaturgy is moot unless it includes a discussion, not only of *what* playwrights create and *how* they create, but also of the social and economic conditions in which they choose to operate" ("Risk Factors" 81; emphasis original). Thiessen recognizes the implications of the position playwrights hold within the NPD discourse, and he designed the Garage from this perspective.

The Garage acknowledges and accommodates both processes of development that are contained within the NPD discourse: play development, and playwright development. In a play development process — the more commonly practiced of the two — the central concern is the improvement of the tangible final product, the play. On the other hand, playwright development is the process that aims to enhance playwrights' capabilities, including both the skills of the craft of playwriting and the professional skills that enable writers to champion their work and develop their careers. I argue that the Playwrights Garage strengthens emerging playwrights' position within the NPD discourse, by giving them not only a play development forum, but also a detailed playwright development curriculum. This is what makes the Garage distinct, and it is why the Garage is creating change within NPD, playwright by playwright.

The Garage is not a perfect model, but it is unique in Canada, and until now it has not been evaluated in depth. For Chapter Three, I interviewed several past Garage participants and Thiessen himself. I also relied on my

own notes and reflections and on several unpublished documents that provide insights into the conception of the Garage and the motivation of its creators.

In my concluding chapter, I attempt simply to provide some wider questions about NPD and its long-term evolution. NPD is a complex field and its scope is national, including a national body of writings on the subject. In response to the vastness of the topic, and the given time and space constraints of an MA thesis, I chose to establish relatively narrow parameters for my project. As a result, this thesis is primarily a regional document, focusing on NPD as it functions in Edmonton. I worked under the assumption that I could balance a theoretical analysis with focused interviews and first-hand empirical research. My experience in the Playwrights Garage provided me with plenty of material for a detailed examination. However, in my conclusion, I do broaden the discussion and provide some speculative reflections and questions for future consideration.

My language throughout this thesis is straightforward and, since I am mainly concerned with concepts such as "workshop" that are common knowledge within the study of Canadian theatre, I have chosen simply to define terms briefly as they are encountered throughout. Nevertheless, I would like to provide here a brief general description of NPD for those who may be unfamiliar with the field. New Play Development is a process by which new plays are revised, edited, and otherwise prepared for full production. This process asks playwrights to collaborate with other theatre practitioners toward this goal. A dramaturg or a director – or a single person

who is both — is a playwright's primary working partner in NPD, although actors and designers also often contribute to the process. There are several typical practices — used by all of the regional play development organizations currently operating in Canada — that can be applied to a play undergoing development.

When a playwright submits a play to a development organization, such as the Alberta Playwrights' Network or the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre, the first step is most often a one-on-one meeting between the playwright and the dramaturg. This meeting enables the playwright to articulate his or her concept of the play and a sense of how production-ready it is. At the same time, the dramaturg provides a first response, and asks questions in order to better understand the playwright's intentions with the work. This relationship, at this initial stage, is at the core of New Play Development.

Meetings between the playwright and the dramaturg often continue while the playwright produces new drafts of the play. When the playwright thinks that the play-in-progress would benefit from exposure to more people, a workshop involving actors, and sometimes designers, may be held. The typical format for a new play workshop is a reading followed by a discussion. The objective for the event is for the playwright to hear the text spoken by actors, and to hear others' impressions, suggestions, and questions, whether or not the playwright is receptive. Workshops vary in length from a few hours to a few days.

A workshop often leads to a staged reading. A staged reading is an event at which actors read the play to the public, although sometimes a reading is held for an invited audience. Staged readings vary according to production values; some use only chairs as set pieces, while others use costumes, props, and technical effects and are only one step short of a full production. The objective of the staged reading is for the playwright to be able to gauge the audience's reaction and learn of any questions that he or she may have unintentionally left unanswered. While all these practices associated with New Play Development focus on the play rather than the playwright, and are concerned with the "produceability" of the play, staged readings in particular tend to neglect the playwright's objectives in the interests of putting on a good show.

In Canada, play development has existed in some form since the early 20th century. Because a play functions as a blueprint for a live theatrical experience, it must be understood to be distinct from other literary texts such as novels and short stories. The inherently collaborative nature of the theatre is a contributing factor in the emergence of widespread New Play Development in the form we recognize today. However, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, a unique combination of factors — including but not limited to the fundamental collaborative purpose of a play text — has caused NPD to evolve as it has in Canada.

Beyond the above background information, there is only one term that I would like to address pre-emptively due to its potential to alienate readers.

"System," as in the phrase "mainstream New Play Development system," is a term that I do not use carelessly. I recognize that this term may be objectionable to some readers, since it conjures images of rigidity and conformity, and simultaneously inflates NPD to a monolith and diminishes it to a rhetorical straw man. I propose here that the word "system" must be imbued with the richness of the concept of "discourse," to which I have already referred. In this thesis, I use the term "system" with full awareness of its implications, and a belief that the term can be reclaimed to serve a balanced discussion of general NPD characteristics and tendencies.

Overall, this thesis has emerged out of my own experiences, beginning as an undergraduate student first encountering New Play Development practices such as workshops and staged readings. I participated in many such practices as a director, actor, and dramaturg during my undergraduate years, including two trips as an intern to the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's highly regarded Spring Festival of New Plays. Initially, I was thrilled to participate in NPD, since workshops, readings, and other elements of the process were intriguing and challenging to me. Gradually, however, I began to develop a certain sense of unease about New Play Development, as I perceived that many development exercises were conducted primarily for the benefit of dramaturgy students, rather than for the benefit of the playwright and his or her play. In performing a preliminary literature review on the subject of NPD, I was also struck by what I believe is a disproportionately small number of oral histories and commentaries from playwrights

themselves. From here, the Playwrights Garage sparked my interest because it is a program that seeks to fortify and equip playwrights, the artists who produce the works around which NPD revolves.

The discussion of NPD is fervent and ongoing, and my thesis is a small contribution to the larger debate. It remains my belief that NPD as a discourse cannot evolve positively and according to our best intentions unless we admit and examine the assumptions underlying our ongoing practices. As Kugler notes to his fellow development practitioners, an examination is an essential starting point, and "If the examination re-affirms those assumptions, so be it. But if not, perhaps there's the possibility of re-thinking and re-shaping a process so that it more appropriately mirrors the mandate of the company [or] the aspirations of the playwright [...]" ("Toward New Developmental Structures": n. pag.). In other words, while it may be difficult to create real change out of a critique, such a critique is still essential to the possibility of positive future change.

CHAPTER TWO

Canadian New Play Development: Dominant Cultural Discourse

Canadian New Play Development (NPD), in the form in which it exists today, is generally accepted to have its roots in the early 1970s, when the Canadian theatre community was undergoing a period of widespread growth and professionalization. This was also a period of intense activity within the broader field of literary and cultural studies, as theorists proposed and debated many of the cornerstone concepts and texts of the 20th century. Discourse analysis theory, like Canadian NPD, advanced notably during the 1970s. This chronological concurrence is not insignificant. While Canadian theatre practitioners were embarking on the national struggle to define Canadian theatre as distinct from the mainstream British and American traditions, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and many others were working in reaction to dominant structuralist and humanist theoretical traditions. As theorist and author Diane Macdonell observes, the weightiest prevailing theories leading up to this period were ultimately idealistic, presupposing "that the truth of a theory is guaranteed by an inner logic and that, applied to a given object, theory will yield a knowledge that can be neutral and true" (17). The struggles of Canadian theatre practitioners and of early discourse theorists are related on a number of levels. Both groups questioned assumptions about the neutrality, truth, and inner logic of traditional forms and modes of thinking. Both groups pursued innovation so that new concepts

and modes of thought, in the face of tradition, would not be "invalidated in advance" (Macdonell 16).

Today, discourse analysis theory, with its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, provides a valuable theoretical framework through which to critique the NPD system. Discourse theory enables us first to articulate NPD as a discourse, and, from there, provides us with tools to unearth significant questions and observations leading back to the origins and objects of the movement. As a discourse, NPD operates using specific rhetoric that reveals a particular ideological position. Participants within it hold roles that vary in terms of power and knowledge, key concepts in Foucault's discourse theory as explored in The Archaeology of Knowledge. NPD's progress from a resistance movement to a dominant cultural institution has shaped all of these dynamic factors, so this progress is ultimately the most important consideration in examining NPD's current state as a discourse. Chapter Two, in presenting a critique of NPD as a discourse, attempts to reveal both the benefits and the flaws of the system. Most importantly, in viewing NPD as a discourse, we can then interrogate it from a theoretical standpoint. This chapter concludes that any critique is inadequate without a subsequent proposal for change; this, then, will be the subject of Chapter Three — an examination of the Playwrights Garage.

For my purposes here, a discourse can generally be defined as a "particular area of language use, [which] may be identified by the institutions

to which it relates and by the position from which it comes and which it marks out for the speaker" (Macdonell 2-3). In other words, a discourse employs specific vocabulary and specific practices involving that vocabulary. A discourse is unique, and functions according to unique objectives, which may or may not be stated explicitly. For example, a discourse may function to maintain the status quo, or to resist it. Finally, a discourse holds a particular position in relation to certain institutions, and individuals hold specific roles within the discourse.

Two more given characteristics of a discourse — key to an analysis of NPD as such — are worth highlighting here. First, although discourses come to exist by different means, they function in intricate and dynamic relationships to one another. For example, the discourse of NPD functions in close relation to the discourse of season selection in mainstream regional Canadian theatres. Further, and most importantly, a discourse is inseparably connected to the ideology it embodies, and from which it emerges: "[...] discourse is one of ideology's specific forms" (Macdonell 45). In the case of New Play Development, a discourse analysis will point to a foundational ideology that is rarely addressed.

The above definition of discourse is broad and allows a variety of applications. As an example of a discourse in action, Macdonell describes the organization of books in a public library, where under the common Dewey Decimal System, fiction and non-fiction are shelved separately. All of the non-fiction titles are grouped according to subject, while all of the fiction titles are

arranged alphabetically by authors' names (Macdonell 4). This example is worth discussing briefly here, since it is analogous to my central discussion of NPD. The objective of this discourse of library book organization is to arrange printed works according to a functioning ideology that views different works in different ways, according to the value placed upon such notions as creativity, authorial primacy, and genre. Fictional titles are related primarily to the name of the author, regardless of variations in subject matter from title to title; however, in non-fiction, the author's identity is usually less important than the subject-related categorization of the information contained in the book.

This discourse relates to a specific institution (the public library), and prescribes clear positions for those who encounter it by requiring readers to seek out different books according to different criteria. A person entering the library becomes accustomed to thinking that the primary distinction among books is whether they are non-fiction or fiction: the success of his or her library visits depends on it. Such a person can easily begin to think of books according to the library's criteria. For example, a person might discover a fiction writer, such as Stephen King or John Grisham, and want to read all of this author's works regardless of subject matter. The likelihood of this devotion being shown toward a non-fiction author would be much more rare, although many notable exceptions exist, such as the readership commanded by Noam Chomsky or Pierre Berton. Embedded in this distinction are the underlying assumptions that guided the discourse's creator in originally

shaping the system. These beliefs can be described: that a work of fiction is the product of a single original and imaginative mind, and should be arranged as such, while a work of non-fiction is more utilitarian, for educational or reference purposes, to be evaluated more according to its usefulness than the distinctiveness of the author's voice. Today, such assumptions might appear slightly antiquated, but the example is a valuable one. The organizational system at work in a library is clearly identifiable as a discourse with objectives and inherent values, and into which participants are interpellated in specific ways. In addition, this discourse is at play in the other areas of the library, including its ground plan, its materials acquisitions procedure, and its curricula of educational programs.

Like libraries, Canadian theatres are institutions, simultaneously common and unique. Each is the site of active, dynamic discourses such as New Play Development, which relates to all Canadian theatres in some way. Other discourses at play within the sphere of Canadian theatre include those relating to funding, play selection and season planning, as well as audience outreach and retention. For now, I will focus on New Play Development as a discourse according to the above definition: that is, in terms of rhetoric, vocabulary, ideology, internal roles and power relations, as well as how it relates to institutions, and how it positions individuals within it.

New Play Development practitioners tend to use specific rhetorical vocabulary in order to describe their practices and processes. Practitioners,

including directors and dramaturgs, may speak of the need to develop "a community of playwrights" and of the playwright's need to "find his/her voice/vision." Such practitioners often describe their work as "support," "guidance," "input," "facilitating," or even more extremely, as Judith Rudakoff says, "moving ideas from the playwright's unconscious into the conscious mind [...] [opening] doors and [waiting] to see who decides to go through them" (27, 31). More skeptical commentators point out that "The rhetoric of new play development repeats the word 'nurture' like a mantra" (Cummings 383). Even the phrase "New Play Development" suggests an underlying assumption that the writing of a new play involves some degree of "development," and this is distinguished from the development that a playwright can do alone, which is called "rewriting" or "drafting." This appears to be unique to the inherently collaborative craft of theatre: in Canada at least, there is comparatively little discussion of "New Ballet Development" for choreographers, or "New Symphony Development" for composers.

This vocabulary, including the common title of the discourse, has been generated by the constant tension within a system that "simultaneously authorizes and infantilizes the playwright" (Cummings 383). Rhetoric surrounding the issue of "ownership" reflects an ongoing struggle; the challenge emerges from the fact that a playwright, wanting to develop his/her play, must come to recognize that this development cannot be done entirely by the playwright alone. As Don Kugler points out: "Playwriting is a solitary act, largely [...] and yet the art form is a collaborative one" (Interview).

Collaboration in the theatre is inescapable: even a process in which a play is written, directed, and performed by a single creator would not be considered complete without the inclusion of an audience, a less obvious but still essential collaborator. The question of who owns the play is intimately linked to the vocabulary and rhetoric of NPD. NPD is so widespread today, and involves so many committed and talented artists, that a playwright's sense of ownership of his/her own work can be affected, as the collaborative spirit of the theatre can trickle down and compromise the fundamental authorial primacy of the text. Judith Rudakoff describes an extreme version of this "meddling" as "Nanny Dramaturgy" (32). No matter how many people feel they have contributed to its development by making suggestions or criticisms, the author remains solely responsible for his or her play.

Equally important to a consideration of NPD's rhetoric and vocabulary is the tendency among NPD practitioners to debate the definitions of certain roles held by participants involved in the process. The primary example in this case is the role of "dramaturg," the person whose function during a play development process is to assist and question the playwright. The dramaturg may meet privately with the playwright to discuss the play, and in a workshop, the dramaturg may act as a mediator or chairperson, controlling the tone and flow of discussion. The role of the dramaturg has been discussed and agonized over in everything from impassioned editorials (such as Sky Gilbert's infamous opinion piece on "saving your play from stupid dramaturgy") to graduate theses (including University of Alberta Master's theses by William

Kerr and Deborah Tihanyi) to informal debates at the local theatre community's establishment of choice. Kerr points out that "it is hard to agree on the spelling and pronunciation of the term, let alone the definition [...]" (33). Of all of the roles within a standard NPD situation, the dramaturg's role is most often defined negatively, as what it is not: "the lack of desire to do someone else's job — notably the playwright's" (Kerr 34). Many people consider dramaturgy to be enigmatic; they may see the dramaturg as a person capable of "Being inside and outside the work at the same time. Not to own something, but to be an insider" (Rudakoff 107). Further, what it means to be a dramaturg "is still such an undisclosed mystery in this country" (Rudakoff qtd. in Tihanyi "New Play Development" 18). Such statements are common stuff in the discourse of Canadian NPD, but they do not empower an emerging playwright who first encounters a dramaturg, armed with difficult questions, in the pressure of a workshop environment. The ongoing uncertainty surrounding the role of "dramaturg" exemplifies a culture in which participants fill specific roles, while what it means to assume such roles remains ambiguous. The dramaturgical "shorthand" described by Deborah Tihanyi allows for more efficient communication within a development event, but like any specialized professional language, it fosters difference between those who know it and those who do not ("Exploding the Boundaries" 72).

Another facet of NPD's role as a discourse is its relationships with institutions. New Play Development is connected to several different cultural institutions, including university drama or theatre departments, but it

primarily relates to the institution of Canadian theatre. Canadian theatres of all sizes are concerned with new plays and their development, whether directly (as when they engage in play development activities) or indirectly (as when they perform relatively new plays that have undergone development). In the early 1970s, many theatre practitioners caught up in the "boom" of the Canadian theatre scene realized that, as Tihanyi says, "there was not much of a body of original Canadian work to choose from" ("New Play Development" 12). From here, these practitioners set out to accomplish what seemed, at the time, the logical thing to do: "to create an environment whereby writers would be attracted to the theatre" ("New Play Development" 12). The nascent field of Canadian New Play Development was swept up in this collective rush to stage Canadian stories with Canadian voices. Fortunately, theatre artists and educators working prior to the 1970s had laid much of the groundwork that enabled the grassroots efforts of early NPD to flourish. Their many significant accomplishments included establishing secondary and post-secondary theatre studies programs; creating a venue for the regional work of the Little Theatre Movement through the Dominion Drama Festival; and aiding the professionalization of playwriting through widely successful radio drama and the founding of the Canada Council.[2] Even when we trace the roots of NPD

[2] Significant persons we should acknowledge from this pre-1970 period include the founder of the Banff School (in 1933), Elizabeth Sterling Haynes; Dominion Drama Festival founder Lord Bessborough, who was Governor General at the time (1932); groundbreaking CBC radio drama producer Andrew Allan, who in the 1940s brought Canadians the work of playwright Elsie Park Gowan, among others; and the very influential Vincent Massey, who contributed to, among others, the founding of Toronto's Hart House theatre (1919), the Stratford Festival (1953), and the Canada Council (1957).

back to the early 20th century, we see that it has always been intimately connected both to the writing and the staging of new Canadian plays, and this remains true today.

As a result of this connection, throughout any individual NPD process involving any particular play or playwright, concerns of craft and aesthetics exist alongside a question about the ideal, though uncertain, fate of the completed play: will it receive a full production? In Canada, this production is likely to take place either in a Fringe situation where the playwright makes all the development choices, or in a regional theatre with a commitment to producing new work. There is a great distinction between these two scenarios, and the latter is much more complicated and difficult to secure than the former. As a result, in an organized NPD situation where a goal is to work toward a full professional premiere in a large regional theatre, the playwright may come to realize that not everyone involved in a workshop or reading is there solely to support the development of the new work for its own sake. As Scott Cummings articulates:

> [...] the actor, director, and dramaturg are present expressly to bring their professional concerns to bear on a nascent script in order to bring it toward their conventional practice. As willing as they are to follow the script's lead, their work is to some degree normative (especially when the playwright is regarded as a novice who needs to learn how the industry really works). (383)

The actors, the director, and the dramaturg(s) involved in any NPD process all bring to bear not only their own backgrounds and competencies, but also — and often unwittingly — their own artistic and professional aspirations, which can result in what Cummings calls "bad-faith participation" (383). This can occur regardless of the conscious intentions or awareness of the participants. Don Kugler points to this potential dynamic more succinctly when he describes the initial reaction of a playwright, regardless of experience, when faced with a room of theatre artists who will encounter his or her new work for the first time: "Oh. I'm outnumbered" (Interview).

NPD, like any discourse, positions individual participants within it based on a number of qualifications, which in this case may include expertise, age, status, knowledge, and formal training. Despite Kugler's argument that all playwrights feel intimidated when entering a new development process, an emerging playwright working in his or her first workshop with a team of seasoned development practitioners may feel especially obliged to be grateful for any and all feedback. As Urjo Kareda notes, the thrill of collaboration is a powerful initial motivator for new playwrights to immerse themselves and their work in NPD practices:

> If you're an amateur painter, you can hang your artwork in your own house or give it to someone as a gift. But if you're an amateur playwright, you yearn for that collaborative impulse, even if you're living in a community that has no live theatre and

> therefore all your influences are from television or film (qtd. in Rudakoff 25).

In Canada today, an NPD experience will likely be a new playwright's first encounter with this collaborative spirit. Even if the playwright has collaborated on previous theatre projects in another capacity, his or her first NPD project as a playwright will still be a new and revelatory experience. This development experience is practically a requirement for any emerging playwright who wants to further his or her playwriting resume and eventually see his or her work performed professionally. At the same time, though, NPD can become a trap for playwrights, a "ghetto where they whittle away at one script or another under the supervision of a committee of creative know-it-alls" (Cummings 383). In Canada, plays that are seen to have been in development for too long may be described as having been "developed to death."

Not everyone involved in the NPD process is there solely to support the development of the play and playwright. As Kugler has noted, a development organization must consider the other pressures it faces, and this can affect its relationship with a playwright:

> The desires and needs of the playwright are often antithetical to the desires and needs of the [NPD] organization. The organization has certain needs: they have to get funding, they have to have a public profile, they have to program. [...] It doesn't say, 'what does the playwright need?' It starts from the needs of

the organization, and then it tries to fit the needs of the playwright inside the needs of the organization. (Interview)

NPD, and the institutions providing NPD services to playwrights, occupy a complex position in that they offer a transitional discourse between the act of playwriting, which is a singular act, and the undertaking of a new play by a Canadian theatre, which is a collaborative act involving many stakeholders. The Canada Council's encouragement of theatre companies' creation of NPD programs has contributed to this situation.

Playwrights and their plays, ostensibly the primary focus and concern of NPD, also face the harshest consequences of a development failure. These consequences can take any number of forms, the most frequent of which is the abandonment of the play. Consequences can even be financial, especially if the developed play has an unsuccessful production, since "Playwrights are, in most cases, the only theatrical artists to share financial risk with the theatre company" (Thiessen "Risk Factors" 81). Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the discourse professes that the NPD process should rarely fail, only because each development event is individually tailored to a play. Liz Grieve asserts, "Every workshop is structured differently: depending on the play, depending on the time, depending on the stage of the play" (qtd. in Kerr: 1). In other words, because the individual development event is customized, it stands a greater chance of succeeding.

At the same time, though, there is an equally urgent current of skepticism about whether this assumption is true. Kugler has noted the

external pressures on NPD organizations that complicate efforts to reflect each playwright's individual needs. During his term as president of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, he also noted:

> [...] I wonder why all these developmental programs look so much the same — the playwrights unit, the pre-scheduled reading or workshop festival, etc. If theatres have distinct mandates, why wouldn't their developmental processes evolve from that mandate, and be equally distinct? [...] Sometimes I feel like, after two-plus decades of evolution in Canadian play development, we've arrived at a one-size-fits-all process. ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.)

These examples reveal that there is among many Canadian theatre practitioners an understanding of NPD's common values and practices, and at the same time, a belief that each development event is individual. Viewing Canadian NPD as a discourse allows us examine this apparent paradox by making a crucial distinction between development as a generic concept, and New Play Development as a discursive system. New Play Development can and must be viewed as a broad discourse, which contains all individual play development practices and events. NPD's current discursive position is also closely related to its evolutionary arc through the past thirty years in Canada.

Canadian New Play Development is a system by which certain structures have developed, bringing consistency and uniformity to individual development events. This has been an undercurrent in Canadian dramatic

literature for the past thirty years. Many practitioners, including Urjo Kareda, have characterized the original impulses of those first involved in NPD as part of a national project to see Canadian stories on the stage:

> Those involved in the Canadian alternative theatre movement also felt that they'd won a big victory in the struggle to get Canadian plays onto the stage. Some of the revolutionary fire that spurred that initial victory then died out: once we became what we wanted to become, we didn't know what to do next. (qtd. in Rudakoff 6-7)

Kugler echoes Kareda's sentiment: "In Canada, the 'radical' activity of the '70s — largely collective creation, and eventually development of Canadian playwrights — has now become institutionalized" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.).

Canadian New Play Development was a new discourse in the 1970s, before it became what many describe today as "institutionalized," "standardized," or "generalized." As Judith Rudakoff notes, the creative culture of the 1970s was largely open and generous, and "The judgmental, critical times came much later on" (142). Likewise, new discourses often evolve out of a resistance to, and problematizing of, dominant discourses that operate according to a humanist conception of individuality and sameness; that is, "the idea that we are all free individuals who speak the same language, hold the same values and know the same truths — unless, that is, we are aberrant and abnormal" (Macdonell 19). The fundamental power of such

discourses lies in their ability to convince us that the more submissive we are, the more individual sovereignty we acquire (Foucault qtd. in Macdonell 19). Michel Foucault's work on prisons and psychiatry, for example, is concerned with the normalizing effects of this notion. Canadian New Play Development emerged in precisely this fashion thirty years ago, when young practitioners created new work out of the nationalist impulse to be distinctly Canadian, free from the normalizing influence of British and American theatrical traditions.

In the 1970s, young English-speaking Canadian theatre artists were immersed in the climate of the times. The volume of landmark events, especially between 1967 and 1973, made this period all the more significant; as Rudakoff notes, "The early 1970s were a time of intense political and social activity in Canada. From Trudeaumania to the declaration of the War Measures Act, from Centennial celebrations to Expo '67, from anti-Vietnam protests to the social integration of the influx of American draft dodgers" (139). Canadian theatre artists were inspired by the times, as were contemporary audiences, who inspired artists with their responses to homegrown work. Bill Glassco, founder of Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, notes that theatre practitioners:

> [...] were motivated by the feeling we got from audiences, that they wanted to hear their own stories. For a while, there was no point in doing an American play, a British play, or anything but a Canadian play: we had too many of our own stories to tell. We

were ready to tell them and we were ready to hear them. (qtd. in Rudakoff 139).

Judith Rudakoff adds, "The tone of the times was inclusive rather than exclusive, and allowed for competition and difference as a positive feature fuelling a burgeoning, healthy theatre ecology. It was all so new that there was room for everything" (142). Fortunately for the young theatre artists of the 1970s, previous generations of Canadian theatre practitioners had successfully created the infrastructure underpinning this new ecology, including funding structures, training opportunities, and theatre spaces in which to experiment. Thanks to these foundational resources, practitioners of the 1970s were able to create new work from the ground up. As Glassco notes, such work was often shaped by their disdain for the commercial mainstream theatre. "One thing we all agreed upon is that we hated [...] the mainstream work we were all trying to avoid" (qtd. in Rudakoff 142). Early NPD practitioners such as Glassco were embroiled in a discursive resistance movement, a search for alternatives to the "hated" mainstream, alternatives to traditional notions about what stories and forms were right for the theatre.[3]

Svetlana Zylin, former Artistic Director of Playwrights Workshop Montreal, highlights the need that existed to create Canadian work specifically in the face of mainstream American and British influences:

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[3] What we describe as avant-garde or alternative theatre was also thriving throughout the Western world during this time. American examples include the work of Richard Schechner, Peter Schumann, Edward Albee, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In Britain, examples include the work of Joan Littlewood and George Devine, and the growth of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In Europe, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet, among many others, were experimenting with form and content.

> [...] because we didn't have a lot of role models within our own community, we were still very involved with imported work from America and Britain. It was important to set up structures within which a supportive environment could, in fact, encourage and facilitate writers [...]. [T]here were no regional voices within our theatres. So, I think for me — as well as for other people — it did come out of a strong nationalistic drive: if we were going to be working in theatre in this country, we wanted it to reflect our concerns and our needs. And [...] if there was no material, then you went out and found people whom you could excite about creating that material. (qtd. in Tihanyi "New Play Development" 14)

Zylin effectively captures the commitment and passion of those working on this national project in those years. The imported mainstream did not reflect real Canadian life to Canadians, and early Canadian NPD practitioners saw in this the basic falsehood of the claim of the mainstream discourse: the "claim to speak on behalf of everyone, saying in effect: 'we are all the same: we all speak the same language and share the same knowledge, and have always done so'" (Macdonell 7). The mainstream British and American dramatic canons, as exemplified by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Arthur Miller, embodied this discourse. In seeking to distinguish Canadian narratives from those of mainstream Britain and America, young Canadian NPD practitioners were resisting that mainstream assertion of "we are all the

same" and that a traditional notion of "correct" plays and playwriting "exists naturally and is part of the order of things" (Macdonell 6). Canadian NPD originally sought to unmask this notion, and in doing so, it became a resistance discourse on its own, complete with specific vocabulary, ideology, and relationships to Canadian theatres.

That was thirty years ago, and the "inclusive" environment of what is commonly called the "Canadian theatre renaissance" is no longer as it was in the beginning. Common sentiments such as Kugler's "one-size-fits-all process" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.), and the widespread cynicism behind such notions as "developed to death," reveal that practitioners do not view NPD as positively as they once did. Key to this increase in cynicism is the perception that NPD has shifted away from its original position as a new and exciting discourse that was instrumental to an essentially Canadian struggle for national identity and narratives. Because NPD is now the dominant discourse in Canadian playwriting, and because relationships of dominance and resistance work in cycles, we are left to wonder what will arise in resistance to mainstream NPD today. This question will be partially answered in Chapter Three, where I will examine the Playwrights Garage program.

It has been critical that we acknowledge NPD as both a set of practices and procedures (the workshop, the reading, etc.), and a discourse. The fundamental rift within the discourse today is exemplified, on the one extreme, by practitioners who seek to describe each NPD event as a purely

individualized part of each play and playwright's development, and on the other, by practitioners who dismiss NPD as a bankrupt tradition. The question now is: if NPD has normalized play development to the point that NPD's practices are in turn reducing the diversity of plays being written and produced in Canada, then what alternatives will arise to resist NPD?

Some practitioners feel that NPD is still a resistance movement. More generally, Judith Rudakoff connects the work of Canadian theatre artists to an ongoing struggle against larger external cultural forces:

> [...] despite geographical vastness and the diversity of the social, political and economic landscapes within our borders, our theatre community shares common ground: our work, no matter how varied in style or content, reflects the belief that theatre, like all art, must be preserved as a necessity (not a luxury), and that our art is a weapon in the battle against cultural obliteration (4).

By extension, NPD still fulfills a role in the struggle for national identity, and as such, it retains its original core ideology. However, some established practitioners acknowledge that playwrights emerging today are effecting change within the mainstream NPD system; as Don Kugler points out: "[...] there's a wave of new Canadian development that's pushing against something that was" (Interview). Perhaps most critically, Kugler calls on other established practitioners, such as his fellow members of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, to consider some significant questions: "[Have] we stopped thinking — really thinking — about the

developmental process itself? Do we merely imitate, or adopt, existing structures? Are we doing new play development by rote? 'Hey, that's how you develop new work.' Well is it? Always?" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.) These questions point to the widely discussed challenges facing NPD now and in the future.

The emerging playwrights of the Playwrights Garage are among those discussing these questions. Because of the Playwrights Garage, they are also encountering the NPD system newly equipped with tools to negotiate it. The Garage model teaches the tools of the playwrights' craft in three distinct areas: training, mentorship, and staged reading. Garage facilitator Vern Thiessen, the primary designer of the program's curriculum, focuses on two types of development at different points during the process: playwright development, and play development. Playwrights are able to develop specific work, but beyond that, they also learn a wide range of skills, from how to maximize workshop benefits to how to apply for a grant. The Garage provides all of this and more to its members, as I will elaborate in the next chapter. This is the only program of its kind currently operating in Canada to combine these three elements into a year-long cycle: nowhere else can this particularly comprehensive, rigorous developmental model be found.

The Garage model is valuable to a discussion of the NPD discourse for a number of reasons, but primarily because it embodies both criticism and positive change within NPD. When a discourse is subject to critique, there is an ongoing risk that the critique may ultimately be inadequate. Diane

Macdonell argues that "Critiques are useful – and insufficient" (61); in other words, a critique alone does not necessarily inspire a meaningful response to that which is being critiqued. Macdonell cites the useful example of the feminist position, common in the 1970s, that a female literary canon should be seen as an alternative to a traditional male-dominated canon. This critique suggests the creation of a female canon, and in this case, the discourse of the notion of "canon," with its arguably phallocentric underpinnings of exclusivity, is not questioned. By making superficial changes that would submit work by female authors to a similarly exclusive system of judgment and hierarchy, the creation of a female canon actually reinforces the dominant discourse. A female canon would enshrine the features of "proper literature" that have hitherto excluded female writers. At the same time, without an interrogation of those features – such as "universality" – the female canon would continue to perpetuate the exclusion of female writers by upholding these traditional values. This would in fact be counter-productive to the feminist cause (63). Such a critique points to merely cosmetic change rather than a real discursive shift.

Macdonell's analogy applies to the present critique of Canadian New Play Development. Here as well, a critique is not necessarily enough. If it were, we may have seen more notable systemic changes in response to the abundance of critiques that have circulated through various media over the years. The most common critique of NPD is the one I have addressed here – the notion that NPD has today become standardized and is no longer truly

responsive to the individual needs of the playwright. Variations of this critique include the "cottage industry" argument, in which critics disparage mainstream NPD organizations for being less concerned with the needs of playwrights than with the ongoing employment of dramaturgs and other development practitioners. A number of actions might logically have emerged from this type of critique, the most extreme of which would have been to dismantle such "institutionalized" programs, then rebuild NPD practices from scratch, with the reconstructions incorporating the critique. However, such an action would not have changed the assumptions underpinning the discourse of NPD: first, that playwrights need others' help to develop their work; and second, that NPD improves plays. For this reason, and because I respect the value of NPD despite its flaws, I have not pursued such a revolutionary hypothesis. Rather, I sought out for study a case that embodies the way in which NPD might truly be changed for the better. Fortunately, I found the Playwrights Garage.

The Playwrights Garage is a valuable model because it represents both critique and change. Its practices grew out of a critique of the current system, and it prepares the way for the transformation of NPD by equipping emerging playwrights to wield more authority within the discourse when they participate in it. One of the Garage's primary goals is to empower playwrights to represent and defend their interests within the existing system, so while it does not explicitly question the discourse of play development, it does seek to redress the imbalance between the discursive rhetoric of "serving the

playwright" and other considerations that encumber the realization of this objective.

As we shall see in Chapter Three, the learning provided to playwrights by the curriculum of the Playwrights Garage does offer a model for long-term change to the New Play Development system, both in practical terms and on the discursive level. Here change is being created gradually within the system, so the change will appear through a process of evolution and continuity, rather than a starker sequence of resistance, upheavals, alternatives, and opposites. The Playwrights Garage is both complicit in, and subversive of, the mainstream NPD discourse. It reflects the ongoing importance of mainstream NPD in telling Canadian stories, and in enabling emerging playwrights to have access to the theatre community. It also empowers playwrights with the knowledge they need to represent themselves and their work better while negotiating the snares and paradoxes of the discourse.

CHAPTER THREE

The Playwrights Garage: A Model to Marry Critique and Change

In the late 1990s, the Playwrights Garage was conceived by Edmonton-based playwright Vern Thiessen and was undertaken with the support of Artistic Director Ron Jenkins of Edmonton's Workshop West Theatre. The program was designed to respond to a scarcity of training opportunities for playwrights within the city of Edmonton. The Playwrights Garage has operated over the course of three year-long cycles, ushering through three groups of emerging playwrights, between 12 and 15 annually, between 2001 and 2004. It is an educational program with a comprehensive curriculum focusing on the development of playwrights' writing and professional skills. While playwrights do experience common play development scenarios during the course of the Garage, its top priority is playwright development. This distinction sets the Garage apart from initiatives far more prevalent, where play development is the central objective.

There are several play development organizations across Canada that also offer playwright training initiatives in addition to their conventional play development practices. For example, Playwrights' Workshop Montreal (PWM), Canada's oldest NPD organization still extant, produces the "Playwrights' Gym." The Playwrights' Gym serves PWM's local playwright members by providing "the opportunity to strengthen their craft in the spirit of a workout" over an eight- to ten-week period (Home page). Like the

Garage, the Gym culminates in a final performance, but still attempts to free playwrights from the pressures of a product-oriented play development process. Like the Gym, the Garage could certainly be described as a workout, although its duration of a full year is significantly longer by design.

Most similar to the Playwrights Garage is the "Writers' Blocks" program run by Vancouver's Playwrights Theatre Centre (PTC). The "Blocks" program is a series of complementary, and sometimes concurrent, development programs operating throughout the year. For example, Block A aims "to hone the playwrights' abilities by isolating and focusing on the fundamentals of playwrighting [sic] through discussion, critiques, and writing exercises" at weekly meetings over a four-month period (Home page). Block M is a series of six weekly meetings related to the development of monologues and solo pieces (Home page). Block B puts playwrights through a typical play development process of "meetings, readings, and workshops" over the course of a year, in order "to develop and fine-tune significant new plays and prepare them for production readiness" (Home page). The four-month Block called "One-on-One" puts emerging playwrights into "a unique mentorship program [...] geared to the needs of each individual playwright" (Home page).

Considered as a single program, "Writers' Blocks" contains all of the main components — training, mentorship, and staged reading — of the Playwrights Garage. However, in the details, the two programs are quite different. The Garage was designed to be a single year-long cycle in which these components function as a comprehensive package, while the "Blocks"

operate separately, although some overlap is likely. The Garage serves a specific niche of emerging playwrights and accepts applications from all interested writers, while only "Block A" is filled by an open competition: the rest of the Blocks are "By invitation only" (Home page).

Most significantly, only one, not all, of the Garage components — staged reading — focuses primarily on the play rather than the playwright; neither the classroom sessions nor the mentor-student relationship revolve around the creation or improvement of a particular play. This is a deliberate expression of the Garage's clear priority of playwright development. PTC's Blocks program, however, consistently focuses on play development — even an when making an application for Block A, which is the "basic playwriting class for beginning playwrights," the playwright must include "a first draft of the play on which you are currently working, along with a cover letter detailing where you feel your script is in terms of development and what you hope to do with it" (Home page). These distinctions are significant because they demonstrate the specific ways in which, with its particular combination of curriculum, time frame, and priorities, the Garage is unique, although other organizations do perform similar work in their own unique ways.

Because one of its central priorities is to provide playwrights with tools and strategies to address common NPD practices, the Garage is also a strong example of a practical and successful model for creating change within the dominant NPD discourse. However, since it functions within the discourse and employs some of NPD's most common practices, the Garage does remain

vulnerable to many of NPD's potential pitfalls, such as the failure of a workshop or staged reading. Still, the Garage curriculum does not advocate that emerging playwrights should abandon the resources available to them through NPD organizations and existing programs. Rather, its curriculum acknowledges NPD, while at the same time promoting change within it. In this way, it challenges Diane Macdonnell's suggestion that critique and change tend to be mutually exclusive. As she states, while "the act of criticizing epistemology is necessary, if we are to break the hold of prevailing ideologies [...] this act cannot be used to start a new theory without reinforcing that hold" (61). The Garage subtly disproves her assertion.

Significantly, the Playwrights Garage appears to achieve the marriage of critique and change that Macdonnell identifies as being so important, yet so rarely accomplished. This critique began with Vern Thiessen, as he questioned whether the conventional NPD discourse fosters playwrights' best and most individual work. He then designed the Garage, which prepares playwrights to represent the specific needs of both their works and careers within the discourse. This chapter explores the context from which the Garage emerged, and goes on to examine its eventual structure, strengths, and weaknesses. The chapter concludes by hypothesizing about the Garage's role in changing Edmonton's NPD landscape.

Much of the information in this chapter is drawn directly from my own observations and experiences as an auditor of the Garage program during its final cycle, 2003-2004. As an auditor, I participated in classroom sessions

and exercises and was granted full access to the rehearsals leading up to the staged readings that concluded the program. I augmented this empirical research by interviewing Vern Thiessen and several past Garage participants.

In the late 1990s in Edmonton, aspiring playwrights could pursue educational opportunities through a limited number of avenues, such as casual playwriting circles, or a half-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Alberta. The most intensive local training program had until recently been the University's MFA Playwriting program, which served only two playwrights at a time, and was put on indefinite hiatus in 1991. Other than the MFA degree program, as Thiessen noted in his initial Garage-related grant application to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts in 2000, there was no long-term intensive program that guided emerging playwrights through the entire process of creating a play, from initial conception to public reading or, ultimately, to a full production. Instead, "In Alberta, most opportunities for novice playwrights are limited to support groups (i.e. playwriting circles), isolated workshop [sic] and the occasional contest." In other words, playwrights had two primary avenues to learn about playwriting and New Play Development: through community, and through competition. Community, as exemplified by support groups, provided a forum for sharing and discussion. Success in competition gave playwrights one way to access workshops and

readings, which were the most common prizes for contests such as Alberta Playwrights Network's "Write to Win."[4]

The absence of sustained playwright training and mentorship opportunities is particularly notable in Edmonton, a city in which many theatre artists pride themselves on the breadth, vibrancy, and supportiveness of the arts community. Judith Rudakoff, who earned her Master of Arts degree at the University of Alberta, reflects a widespread optimistic sentiment when she notes: "In the Edmonton theatre community [...] there's a sense that by discovering commonality, by working together we will all get stronger and move forward" (101). Don Kugler, a past Artistic Director of Edmonton's Northern Light Theatre, agrees: "Edmonton felt like a single whole community rather than a lot of distinct communities that made up a whole. The theatre community was warm and embracing" (qtd. in Rudakoff 100).

However, this community spirit had not resulted the establishment of a distinct, rigorous development forum for emerging playwrights, through which they could not only benefit from belonging to a community, but could also learn and practice the skills specific to playwriting. Playwrights even had few means of learning about what Thiessen calls the "social and economic conditions" in which professional playwrights function ("Risk Factors" 81). Thiessen described this lack in the Garage's Alberta Foundation for the Arts grant application:

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[4] The Alberta Playwrights Network also conducts the Alberta Playwriting Competition, which awards cash prizes to two new plays annually, but in Alberta, such a contest is the exception rather than the norm.

> Unlike other elements of the theatre, there is no training for playwrights in Alberta. By training, I do not mean a specific method or genre, but rather a development program that takes into account all the individual needs of the writer.

In Edmonton, much emphasis had been placed on the creation of a playwriting community, such as playwriting circles where writers share work in progress. However, as Thiessen noted in his grant application, this community as it exists is inadequate because it does not foster concrete, sustained efforts to develop the skills of new playwrights, and to connect them with theatres that will produce their work. A small number of successful playwrights do benefit from influential connections within this community; however, despite these examples, the community neither addresses nor alleviates the necessity for most playwrights to compete with each other for the attention of various NPD organizations and producing theatres. This factor, among others, prevents the playwriting community from being as successful and supportive as it could be.

As Thiessen pointed out in an interview, a "playwriting circle" is not necessarily helpful to the development of a playwright, except insofar as it offers a certain amount of support consistent with the notion of community. Playwriting circles and other conventional mechanisms do not necessarily provide emerging playwrights with opportunities to learn both the skills of play development (improving the play) and of professional development (seeing the play staged). Further, in Thiessen's opinion, playwriting circles

have tended to be "coffee klatsches" for gossiping and sharing work in progress, and have not always been structured to provide diligent and detailed support to emerging playwrights looking not merely to share their work with colleagues, but also to be widely read and produced (Interview). Thiessen describes "the study of the craft of the play" as "the missing link" in the playwright gatherings that were prevalent throughout the 1990s (Interview).

By 2001, Thiessen's perception — that local playwrights face a significant lack of training opportunities — had continued to grow, despite that at the same time, nearly every theatre company in Edmonton possessed some sort of New Play Development program. For example, Workshop West Theatre hosted a Playwrights Circle; Theatre Network produced the annual Next Generation Arts Festival (commonly known as NextFest); and various companies, including the Citadel Theatre, provided project-based developmental support to playwrights under commission. Despite such initiatives, which were products of the contemporary mainstream NPD environment, Thiessen maintains that NPD practitioners were all the while paying "lip service" to the notion that NPD, with all of its programs, was really "playwright-driven" (Interview). The examples I have cited here are not playwright-driven. They were not initiated by or for playwrights, and while they may appear to be "playwright-driven," they are in fact "play-driven," focusing on the development of a product (the play) rather than on the development of the playwright's skills.

This distinction between "playwright-driven" and "play-driven," and

the dominance of the latter, helps to illustrate why, as Don Kugler notes, "all these developmental programs look so much the same" ("Toward New Developmental Structures" n. pag.). The playwriting community is more heterogeneous than the practices of most NPD programs. If Kugler is right, then there must be homogenizing factors affecting the design and implementation of these programs, leading them to focus more on plays than on playwrights. One of these factors is the influence of other practitioners who work professionally within the discourse, including directors and actors, and especially dramaturgs. In Canada, dramaturgs are the only theatre practitioners whose professional work and function relates predominantly to play development. Judith Rudakoff asserts that "In Canada, dramaturgy is synonymous with new play development" (3). However, this strikingly contrasts the fact that for a playwright, full development is ideally a full production. Development, for a playwright, is not a final destination. But for a dramaturg, development work is his or her professional home base; to a dramaturg, play development is a career. Because of Canadian dramaturgy's current tendency to prioritize play development over playwright development, the professionalization of the dramaturg is clearly a factor in the gradual homogenizing of NPD relationships and practices. Throughout the 1990s, and as he designed the Garage, Vern Thiessen came to perceive a correlation between the professionalization of dramaturgy and the shortage of local playwright development opportunities. This heightened his concern that in a system whose resources are always strained, emerging playwrights' more

extensive needs were being neglected in favour of the status quo of product-oriented play development.

Thiessen also perceived a corresponding increase in opportunities for theatre students to learn and practice New Play Development as dramaturgs. Rather than learning the skills of the craft of playwriting, students had more opportunities to learn the practices of dramaturgy, techniques associated with "helping" a playwright to develop his or her play. Students could more easily find avenues by which to learn about working with playwrights, conducting workshops and readings, and criticizing plays than they could about how to write plays and experience development from a playwright's point of view. Thiessen insists that while playwriting is an art form, dramaturgy is not; it is, rather, "a cottage industry [...] a service industry" that thrives primarily on the backs of playwrights (Interview). To Thiessen, this distinction is a crucial reflection of a system that prioritizes play development, in which dramaturgs have the major stake, over playwright development, which would focus on playwrights themselves. Ideally, playwright development would be led by playwrights, and would not necessarily require the participation of dramaturgs.

Thiessen's observations raise a number of questions about the underlying tensions that affect relationships among playwrights, development programs, and producing theatres. If a local playwriting community does exist, what purpose does it serve to bring playwrights together if they are no better able to represent their interests in the larger community as a result?

Further, what are the implications of a widespread assumption that playwrights need development assistance from dramaturgs and other collaborators? Does this assumption imply that playwrights cannot help themselves or each other in this task? To an emerging playwright, the playwriting community in Edmonton functions in a climate where reality contradicts professed values and priorities. There is a proliferation of dramaturgs and dramaturg-training opportunities, and at the same time, a relative shortage of complementary programs and support for playwrights. While the rhetoric of NPD professes that the system exists to serve playwrights, the reality is considerably less clear, since playwrights are only one of several beneficiaries of NPD practices.

Thiessen's original conception of the Playwrights Garage was inspired by his frustrations with this status quo for playwrights. As a playwright himself, having trained in the University of Alberta's Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting program prior to its suspension, Thiessen is one of relatively few local playwrights who have fully devoted their lives to the craft of playwriting (Interview). Thiessen himself sees a distinction between playwrights who have committed themselves professionally to the craft and only infrequently work in other roles within the theatre, and other writers who are chiefly actors or directors, for whom writing is a secondary activity (Interview). Thiessen hesitates to use the term "playwright" to describe these part-time writers. To him, the notion that playwriting can be an avocation or part-time occupation is another example of the underlying values of common NPD rhetoric. At the

same time that it validates the notion that anyone can write a play, the practices of the NPD discourse are based on the premise that no one can write a play without development collaboration from other people. In other words, NPD has the capacity to both encourage and devalue playwriting at the same time. While he does believe that anyone can learn the basics of writing a play, Thiessen draws a clear line between such mechanical ability and the unique and specific combination of talent, labour, perseverance, and artistry that is necessary to be successful, by any measure, as a career playwright.

This distinction provides a key insight into Thiessen's drive to design a curriculum for the Playwrights Garage with a distinct and deliberate emphasis on playwright development. The universalizing notion that anyone can write a play — an attitude that is embedded in the linking of inclusiveness and support common in playwriting circles — is a distortion of the belief that it is an asset for all theatre artists, regardless of role or designation, to have an understanding of the perspective of the playwright, and the intricacies of his or her craft. An understanding of the playwright's task should ideally generate respect and deference for the art of playwriting. Instead, this understanding has fostered a general climate in which it is common, especially for emerging theatre artists, to believe that playwriting is more straightforward and less difficult than it actually is. We may deride those art gallery devotees who evaluate a painting with the dismissive cliché "I could do just as well as that," but the theatrical equivalent seems to exist in this attitude toward playwriting. In the discourse of NPD, this attitude serves to lower the status of playwrights,

and to empower the "cottage industry" that often acts as a gatekeeper between a playwright and the production of his or her play.

The Playwrights Garage stands in opposition to this attitude, beginning with the program's rigorousness and comprehensiveness. The playwrights who enter the Garage program are part of an exclusive group. They are not completely new playwrights; rather, they tend to have some experience studying playwriting and participating in NPD through other programs. They may have received public readings of their work, even productions of shorter work, and many of them have self-produced their work at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival. However, they have not been fully produced by an established professional theatre company. The Garage is tailored to serve this niche of playwrights who have some training and experience, and who have demonstrated both talent and commitment. The Garage also fills a need for dedicated development support among those who may be unable to visit the Banff Colony or to commit to a university or other post-secondary program because of other obligations.

In guiding the Garage from paper model to working program, Thiessen consistently emphasized the need to encourage a sense of community among emerging playwrights. But, Thiessen also recognized that there was an urgent need for a local program that would go beyond merely maintaining community spirit, and would counteract the "lip service" paid to playwright development. In addition to preparing playwrights to represent themselves and the best interests of their plays at all times, the Playwrights Garage would

be a program that would represent playwrights to the larger theatre community. Along with a commitment to foster each playwright's individual voice, these were the comprehensive objectives of the Playwrights Garage program.

"The Playwrights Garage is unique to play development in Canada" (Alberta Playwrights Network Funding Application n.pag.). This uniqueness lies in the program's format, which ultimately took shape as a year-long cycle with three distinct phases. In its three-year history, beginning with the 2001-2002 class, the Garage ushered through three groups of students, and while there were some minor variations in the curriculum content, the following three priorities remained constant: training, mentorship, and workshopping/staged readings. While these three were closely connected, training and mentorship were the dominant components of the curriculum. In this way, the Garage remained focused on playwright development, and participants experienced a production-oriented play development process only in preparation for the final staged readings. Currently, the Garage is defunct; after the third cycle, Thiessen decided to step away from the program and no one has stepped in to fill the leadership void. Despite this, I have framed the following description of the program's components in the present tense, in order to enliven it.

Training: At the outset of the New Year, usually in February or March, the new Garage class begins meeting at least once a month, more often if

necessary. These meetings are organized around a variety of discussion topics, designed and led by Thiessen himself. Topics range from "What is a play?" to "How do I get my play read/produced?" Other classroom sessions are shaped around the following questions, which grow increasingly complex as the group progresses:

- what are my favourite plays, and why do they appeal to me?
- what are plot, action, and conflict, and how do they function?
- what is the function of character?
- what are dialogue and monologue, and what are their functions in terms of action and language?
- how can I narrow my focus in order to produce the best work I can?
- what tools can I use in redrafting my work on my own?
- how can I get the most out of a workshop?

The topics build on one another, and at all times, there is a concern with valuing, acknowledging, fostering, and representing each playwright's own style.

Further, in every class, students are required either to complete and share spontaneous writing exercises, or to present passages from works in progress. Students read their own and each other's work aloud, which is central to the creation of the supportive environment that the Garage represents. The experience of reading and hearing their work is also significant to the students' preparation for the later workshop and reading phase of the Garage. Like the portion of the meetings organized around a

specific topic, reading new work is always connected to the larger topic of the day.

For example, the Garage meeting held on April 13, 2003 was organized around the topic of dialogue. Thiessen lectured briefly on the questions of "what is dialogue?" and "what qualities does the language of dialogue need to have?" The students then explored these questions in class exercises. Students examined the ways in which words and punctuation express action by writing a short scene that began with the line "...I don't know" and ended with the line "If that's the way you want it," which were randomly suggested by participants. To explore precision and conciseness, students wrote another brief exchange between two speakers, then reduced each line to its first two or three words and re-read the scene aloud.

These simple exercises illustrated Thiessen's discussion of dialogue, and illustrated the importance of subtext and economical language. At no point did Thiessen prescribe a preferred model for crafting dialogue. However, his specific description of its function and quality, explored through the accompanying exercises and discussion, gave the students much to consider within the context of their own styles and working preferences.

In each class, Thiessen balances the ongoing examination of the craft of playwriting with topics which participant Paul Matwychuk describes as "the business tools" of playwriting. For example, a lecture and discussion on September 14, 2003 focused on the process of writing grant applications to agencies such as the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Edmonton Arts

Council, and the Canada Council. For playwrights in the Edmonton area, grant-writing is certain to be a required activity at some point if they wish to secure financial support for the writing of a play, or for a professional premiere production. Thiessen also equips his students with knowledge they may need later in their playwriting careers; for example, when their work is published, they will already know about the CANCOPY agreement and other copyright concerns. Other topics include finding commissions, and negotiating rights and royalties. So, while Garage meetings focus primarily on the aesthetic side of playwright development, they also incorporate a concern with the legal, financial, and other aspects of the profession above and beyond the writing of a well-crafted play.

As an auditor at the Garage during its final year, I was an equal member at meetings and in discussions, and I participated in the writing and reading assignments that formed the in-class curriculum. As both a participant and an observer, I appreciated Thiessen's success at creating the safe, supportive environment that to him is a very important element of any playwriting group. At the same time, throughout all of the exercises, discussions, and sharing, there was an undercurrent of serious industriousness and even friendly competition. This element of the group dynamic can be viewed as either a strength or a weakness. It is a good illustration of one way in which the Garage unintentionally duplicates a common feature of NPD.

Paul Matwychuk and Mark Stubbings are Garage participants from the 2002/2003 cycle. I interviewed them separately, and although they both

identified competitiveness as a notable element of the dynamic within their participant group, it was clear they viewed it quite differently. To Matwychuk, the spirit of friendly competition was appealing, and he found it enhanced his own work within the Garage:

> Regularly meeting with a bunch of other writers, I always find that a very stimulating thing ... [It's] a community thing and also, in some ways, it's a sort of competitive environment, a very benignly competitive environment. There's other people writing, well, you better keep pace with them...not like you have to outclass everyone else in the room, but here's someone doing this interesting play here, there's someone else, [so] I'm feeling like I better do something too. (Interview)

Mark Stubbings, who had previously studied playwriting with Thiessen in an undergraduate course at the University of Alberta, found that the main difference between that course and the Garage was this element of competiveness, which he did not view favourably:

> I got a real competitive vibe. It was weird, it was like, "okay, let's read our pieces," and then "mine's better than that, mine's better than that." [...] It was this group of people that were pretending that they were very supportive towards everyone, but then there was this weird competitive streak going on, that's how I felt about it. (Interview)

By contrast, the 2003-2004 group did not demonstrate as competitive a

dynamic. Playwright Morgan Smith observed:

> I thought the group dynamic was really open and relaxed, which I think is really important. I don't think anybody was judgmental. [...] Nobody was negative about anybody's writing. [...] Everybody found the good things about each other's writing to enjoy.

Playwright Christopher Grignard agreed:

> It was very supportive. I think there was a respect among us. [...] Diversity was there in terms of what our personal definitions of theatre were. The first class was so important. For Vern to have had it in the Citadel boardroom upstairs, surrounded by all these past artistic directors...this made for a powerfully charged group. (Interview)

As these examples illustrate, the dynamic of each Garage group is unpredictable, despite Thiessen's efforts to lay the foundations of a nonjudgmental, "safe" classroom environment. The fact is that in Canadian theatre, there are more playwrights, and more new plays, than there are possibilities for production. Therefore, playwrights will continue to pursue the opportunities provided by competitions. As a result, an undercurrent of competitiveness within the Garage group is not only understandable but also realistic.

Despite having faced the Garage's methodical classroom curriculum of writing, reading, lecture, and discussion, participants attending the Garage

classroom sessions frequently, after the meeting is officially concluded, continue their discussions in a less formal, and perhaps less competitive, environment. These post-meeting gatherings are just as important to fostering a healthy community as are the classroom sessions themselves. In this less structured social atmosphere, Garage participants come to realize how diverse are their backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. While some participants are already acquainted with each other, thanks to their community theatre, Fringe, or post-secondary experience, the Garage members as a group are not necessarily well acquainted at the outset of the program. This socializing pays dividends in subsequent Garage meetings, when participants are able to understand and respond to one another's work more insightfully and unselfconsciously.

At the same time, the Garage does not, nor should it, neutralize all of the personal or aesthetic differences within such a diverse group of playwrights. As Mark Stubbings noted: "I didn't necessarily jell with a lot of people in the class, in terms of just personalities, and there were people who thought 'high art,' and people who just wrote" (Interview). Morgan Smith also observed: "I'd be lying if I said that I liked the writing of everyone in my group, but then again, I don't think everybody in the class liked my writing, either, which they shouldn't" (Interview). As in any community, diversity, even non-compatibility, can be a strength, because it encourages debate and openmindedness. Participants are free to involve themselves in the Garage group to the extent that they feel they benefit from it. The Garage brings

together playwrights on the basis of their talent and commitment, not because of the compatibility of their writing interests.

Mentorship: Mentorship is the second of the three Garage priorities. Throughout the one-year span of meetings, Garage participants are meeting privately with their mentors. Each Garage member is paired with a different professional who is active in Alberta's playwriting community. At the outset of each new Garage cycle, participants submit mentor requests to Thiessen; he then helps each participant identify the mentor who would best suit his or her needs. Once the playwright has chosen a mentor, Thiessen contacts the individual and formalizes the agreement. The mentorship element of the Playwrights Garage is the area of the program that can be most closely tailored to the specific requirements of each playwriting student. Thiessen advises participants about who may be best suited to them according to where they most need development support. In addition to this, mentors are paired with Garage participants according to common interests in style and subject-matter. Some participants require mentors who have meticulous revision skills; others need help promoting their work for production; and still others benefit most from working with a mentor who will fulfill the role of a confidant, a sounding board, and be a source of support and encouragement.

Each mentor is paid an honorarium of two hundred dollars for approximately ten hours of work with a Garage participant. Beyond initially making the matches, Thiessen does not intervene in the mode or nature of communication between mentor and participant; the participants are

responsible for establishing and maintaining contact with their mentors.

The mentorship phase of the Garage curriculum holds the greatest potential long-term benefits for the participants, but it also presents them with considerable challenges. In their scheduled classroom meetings, participants learn and practice ways in which to communicate with others about their work — how to describe it, how to absorb and respond to comments about it. Each playwright must then immediately use these skills with his or her mentor. If the participant is unable to articulate accurately and assertively his or her needs within the mentor-student relationship, then the benefits of this relationship may be meagre to non-existent. Add to this several other factors, including the busy schedules of both people. In some cases, difficulties arise because of a long-distance relationship (such as with a mentor living in Calgary or Lethbridge).

Some participants find themselves matched with absentee mentors. Mentor absenteeism has a variety of causes, but it is the most common challenge faced by participants in their mentor-student relationships. Paul Matwychuk reflected on his experiences with his mentor, a playwright based in Lethbridge:

> That one didn't actually work out, not that we didn't get along, we just never really made contact [...] I tried to get ahold of him a few times, but we never really had any meetings. That part of the Garage sort of fizzled for me...I chose him very specifically because I'd always written monologues [...] and I really wanted

> to write a proper, acted-out, dialogue play. [...] And [my mentor's] plays have this great energetic dialogue, and I was hoping to, you know, find out his tricks... (Interview)

Admitting that this outcome may have been different had he more diligently pursued his relationship with his mentor, Matwychuk assumed responsibility for this disappointing mentorship experience (Email).

Despite not being separated by geography, Mark Stubbings found that he, too, struggled to meet with his mentor, because the two had such busy schedules. When the two did meet, Stubbings was pleased that his mentor had read and enjoyed his work, but he also found this to be both a blessing and a curse:

> I didn't get my full hours, which I wasn't really adamant about, since I know people are busy. My experience with [my mentor] was that [...] he read my stuff and would say, "okay, this is a logic problem," but for the most part he was like "it was good, it was funny, I liked it." (Interview)

The one thing that Stubbings wanted to get out of the Garage was a suggestion about how best to get produced professionally, and while he thought that his mentor would be able to give him the answer, his expectation was not fulfilled:

> I did ask [my mentor]: how do I go about this? Where do I send this? Do I just send it off to Samuel French and hope I get published? Or do I have to actively go around? Give me a name... [So] the networking aspect of the program didn't work

out for me. (Interview)

Perhaps the most striking example of an unsatisfactory mentorship arrangement was that of Christopher Grignard. As Grignard explained, although he was thrilled to be paired with his mentor, a local playwright and actor whose style and interests mirror his own, the two never once met, despite his repeated efforts:

> I definitely wanted to work with [my mentor]. I was familiar with his work, I was familiar with his sensibility, and my play has a transgendered character in it and it's very campy and over the top. [But] I did not get one minute of the ten hours I was supposed to have with him. [...] I gave [my mentor] a copy of my first play and its reviews and I wanted to get feedback from him and I never heard back from him. [...] I contacted him recently asking if he could look at an opening monologue from the play and he couldn't locate it [the play]. (Interview)

Having had time to reflect on the experience, Grignard observed:

> You feel let down. You should not feel let down with a mentor, because that defeats what a mentor is. [...] The mentors that are approached need to be reminded that this is a professional setting, a professional program. [...] It bothers me because [the mentors] were paid. [...] If I'm being paid for a job where I'm called a mentor I should take that job very seriously. [...] They should take the responsibility and do it. [...] I'm not bitter...I'm

just disappointed. (Interview)

In hindsight, a case such as this suggests that an intervention by Thiessen might have been appropriate. Aesthetically, Grignard's mentor might have been a perfect match for the young playwright, but there is clearly a gap between being an accomplished playwright and being an effective mentor. Successful mentorship requires skills that may have little relationship to a playwright's aesthetic or professional acumen.

Fortunately, not all mentorship relationships are negative. Morgan Smith's experience with her mentor stands in stark contrast:

> I had a great experience with [my mentor]. The only problem was getting in touch with him, getting to meet him. When I did meet with him, we had excellent conversations, we really hit it off. [...] He's a really great, supportive guy. [...] We had the same aesthetic, theatre-wise, and we're both really passionate about things we hated, which was really important. And he really liked my writing. [...] I was really lucky that he liked my writing, because I really like his writing, and I really like his acting. He's one of my favourite actors. [...] I've always admired how he just gets to the point, even when he's just acting. [...] He was the same way in our meetings. (Interview)

Smith's rapport with her committed and interested mentor was extremely valuable to her, and we can see how much her time in the Garage was enhanced because the mentorship phase met her expectations. Smith's

mentor followed through with her even after what turned out to be a frustrating reading at the final Garage presentations; the two were able to meet to debrief the experience. Smith credits this support for helping her to deal with an upsetting public reading: "He was very eager to meet after that reading. [...] He recognized that it was awful. [...] We talked about it and went through the script and it was really nice to sit down with him right after. He encouraged me to keep working on it" (Interview).

Staged Readings: The staged readings are the third and final phase of the Garage program. They take place at the end of the program's cycle and are part of Workshop West Theatre's Kaboom Theatre Festival, which is an annual festival of new Canadian plays — including work from Edmonton — that takes place in either February or March. The Kaboom Festival generally follows the same structure year after year. First, there are a selected number of "headline" performance pieces by relatively high-profile Canadian artists (previous participants have included Karen Hines, Marie Brassard, and Daniel MacIvor). In addition, since 2004, Kaboom has included "Springboards," a program that presents new plays by Edmonton playwrights in a traditional staged reading format. Finally, there are the Playwrights Garage readings, which constitute the culmination of the Garage program. All of these are fully professional events for which tickets are sold.

The Playwrights Garage readings occupy two evening slots within the two-week Kaboom Festival. The format for the readings is straightforward. Two local directors are hired to direct them (a different one for each night;

past Garage directors have included Bradley Moss, Mieko Ouchi, and Ron Jenkins); four local actors are hired to be the readers; and the playwrights are divided into two groups with approximately six playwrights in each group. The Garage readings also benefit from the presence of Dave Clarke in the role of sound designer. Clarke is able to use sound to augment readings that are otherwise bare-bones in terms of production values. A basic house lighting plot, including simple warm and cool washes, is at the director's disposal. Props and set pieces are foregone in favour of the familiar play-reading aesthetic of chairs and music stands. The audience is seated in the style of a cabaret.

The rehearsals for the readings are also structured to be both professional and minimal. The Garage rehearsals take place over six consecutive days: four days for rehearsal, followed by one day for each group's technical rehearsal and performance. Each of the Garage participants' plays is scheduled to receive 135 minutes of individual attention from the director and the actors, plus time spent during each of the technical rehearsals prior to the evening readings (Playwrights Garage Rehearsal Schedule).

Throughout the year of Garage classroom sessions, Thiessen explains the guidelines for these presentations: each playwright has between ten and fifteen minutes in which to present either an excerpt from a larger work in progress, or a self-contained short work. Garage playwrights are fully aware of the parameters of the Kaboom presentation a year in advance, so they are free to work on it consistently throughout the year. They may take advantage

of classroom time that is designated for work in progress, or wait until late in the year and work on it only in the brief period leading up to Kaboom. As far as the Garage participants are concerned, the parameters are few: the piece must be brief, and it must be suitable for reading by no more than four actors. Participants know that most technical effects have to be suggested or described, since given the available technical resources, they are not possible realistically. Finally, playwrights know that they have no choice about who will collaborate with them in the Kaboom readings; the performers, director, and other production team members are assigned.

Significantly, Garage participants know that once the Kaboom rehearsal process begins, the emphasis will shift away from their development as playwrights, and will instead focus on the presentation of the work. In fact, while most playwrights choose to attend rehearsals devoted to their work, their attendance is not mandatory, and rehearsals continue in the same fashion with or without the participation of the playwright. This transition from playwright development — where students are free from pressure to create a finished "product" — to play development and production — where the play is taken out of their hands and given to others — is the greatest challenge to the playwrights of the Garage program. It requires them to draw immediately upon the lessons they have learned during the Garage classroom sessions, in that they suddenly find themselves immersed in a working environment that, while nominally acknowledging their needs as developing playwrights, is primarily focused on the production of two full evenings of

high-quality staged readings. Although the playwrights are not seeing their work fully produced in a professional theatre setting, the Kaboom readings are nonetheless as close to this scenario as most of them have hitherto experienced.

The readings — in rehearsal and in performance — are structured the same way as mainstream NPD events. One the one hand, this makes them valuable to the playwrights, because they know that the readings are similar to experiences they may have in the future. On the other hand, the playwrights must confront a fundamental NPD paradox: the tension between the long-term needs of the students' pieces, which are still in process; and the short-term needs of the performance, which is a product to be presented to a paying audience. The readings are the Garage's capping exercise that displays the results of the participants' labour. At the same time, rehearsals for the readings relegate playwrights to the role of observer as the performance text is now fixed, and the focus is shifted to staging.

Each play initially receives a 75-minute rehearsal. During this time, the actors read the piece for the first time, with Thiessen attending with the playwright, if possible. This first reading includes a brief period during which the playwright may field questions, or speak about his or her vision and intent for the work. Thiessen and the playwright then leave the rehearsal room and for the next few minutes, two conversations continue separately. In the rehearsal hall, the actors, director, and sound designer discuss the piece in the playwright's absence, and immediately begin to identify staging and

production requirements, including ideas about characterization as well as sound and music. Outside the room, Thiessen – having shifted to the role of dramaturg or editor – gives his notes privately to the playwright. These notes may only include cuts to the text to shorten the running time. However, in the case of less polished works, Thiessen also gives direct notes about the play's shortcomings and inconsistencies, and provides concrete suggestions about how to address expediently the work's flaws in order to present the most coherent text possible. This private meeting between Thiessen and the playwright does not last long, and the efficiency of the discussion removes any doubt that the playwright is now immersed in the intensity of production. Thiessen has changed hats, transforming from instructor to editor, and there is a marked change in how he communicates with his Garage students. For the first time, his instructions can be specifically prescriptive, as he gives directions to improve length or structure.

All that Thiessen has taught his Garage students about representing their interests, vision, voice, and play during development is now being tested, especially since Thiessen himself is critiquing the playwright's work for the sake of production needs. For many Garage playwrights, including Paul Matwychuk, these editing sessions are "nothing major," but rather a time to deal with text "that feels awkward in the actor's mouth" or is "the weird little idea of mine that didn't translate [...]" (Interview). In some cases, however, the editing can be more trying for the playwright, depending on his or her capacity to make effective choices when the clock is ticking.

The readings themselves are also challenging to playwrights because they must not only sit through the reading of their work but also receive feedback, solicited or not, at the conclusion of the night of readings. For Kaboom 2004, Morgan Smith chose to present an excerpt from a larger work drawing upon the story of Electra. Smith's style is unconventional; with a black sense of humour, she frequently juxtaposes conventions from diverse genres. She considers her work to be more successful if it is played subtly, although it may at first appear outrageous (Interview). Rendering her piece clearly proved to be a great challenge to some of the actors. For Smith, the experience of having a "spectacular failure" at Kaboom was devastating at the time, but a year later, she is grateful for the experience; after all, she says, "It makes a great story":

> It was a very rushed process, which is fair. I wasn't expecting anything else. [The director] was really concerned about getting it right [...] I thought that there was a medium that was never reached; it was either really far one way or really far the other way. The tone of my writing is kind of ambiguous because [...] it usually swings back and forth from comedy to tragedy. Some of the comments I got [from Vern Thiessen] were that the tone wasn't clear enough, and I didn't necessarily agree. I didn't want to simplify anything...and my mentor agreed with me. [...] I had no problem with cutting things that weren't working. [...] I had no conflicts on that level. Just the way it turned out was very

disappointing for me.

Although time has given Smith a sense of perspective on the event, it was at the time difficult to watch:

> [...] It [the staged reading] seemed to spiral out of control, where instead of playing the scene that I had written, it started to become about clowning the scene. [...] I don't feel this way anymore, but at the time, it was almost as if it was being made fun of, the writing itself was being sent up. [...] It was hard to watch. I was quite upset right afterwards, but it was not a malicious thing, [...] the energy just sort of spiraled into a different realm. [...] The audience was having a good time, but it wasn't what I wrote. (Interview)

Smith has come to the conclusion that seeing her work misunderstood by some actors and audience members was ultimately valuable. She realizes that she would rather have had a bad reading than a mediocre reading, since the bad reading was at least a definite learning experience. She reflected, "In retrospect, I'm glad I had the experience. There were a few people [...] who came up to me and said 'I know that's not what you wrote, but I can see what you did write and it is good.' And I thought, thank God, it came through anyway" (Interview). Smith's Kaboom reading was one of the most challenging events of her time as a playwright, but like many experiences at the Garage, it has proven its value over time.

Each of the three components of the Garage model — training in

classroom sessions, mentorship with an established professional playwright, and a staged reading exposing each participant's work to the public — has both strengths and weaknesses. Often, each individual feature of the program can appear as both a strength and a weakness, depending on each participant's characteristics. For example, friendly competition in the classroom was stimulating for some participants and disconcerting for others. In this way, the Garage reflects the diversity among playwrights' relationships with NPD, and challenges students to discover their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as their own preferences in approaching NPD. The experiences of playwrights within each phase of the program reveals that while the Garage aims to change NPD through playwright development, it also functions within the larger discourse, and as such is vulnerable to perpetuating some of the same tendencies — such as competitiveness — as other development initiatives. These tendencies are both risks and realities for emerging playwrights, and they are apparent throughout the Garage program.

The classroom sessions are a rich source of knowledge for all of the participants. They share works in progress, but they do so in a controlled environment where the objectives of such sharing are clearly tied to the learning objectives of the session, and to the larger curriculum. Very little time is devoted to what Thiessen would describe as "coffee klatsch" discussion. Like many playwriting circles with less ambitious educational goals, the Garage proposes to provide a supportive environment in which each

participant can exercise his or her own playwriting voice. However, even though the Garage provides a structured environment for sharing new work, it cannot suppress dynamic tensions based on personality, ego, or competitiveness. This fact provides two insights: first, that the concept of a "playwriting community" based on mutual generosity and support is idealistic, and cannot necessarily be realized merely by bringing a group of playwrights together; and second, that since competition is an unavoidable element in any playwright's career, students may benefit from exposure to a supportive environment that requires them to present and consider their work in comparison with that of others.

Mentorship — the phase designed specifically to create productive relationships between emerging playwrights and established playwrights — also raises questions about the rhetoric and reality of community within the NPD discourse. Mentor-student meetings expose a student to the experience of a one-on-one discussion about his or her work, which commonly occurs within the NPD system, and is something notably different from the large-group discussions held in the Garage classroom sessions. At the same time, the mentorship phase exposes Garage playwrights to strains on the supportiveness of the established playwriting community, including conflicting schedules, priorities, personalities, and expectations.

The staged Kaboom readings that culminate the Garage experience are the phase of the program that most closely reflects common practice within mainstream NPD. They involve a number of artists — actors, directors, stage

management — who are brought in at the end of the Garage process to produce the readings. The experience is intense, with decisions and changes being made quickly from necessity. The playwright faces hard choices about editing or redrafting the script, and while he or she can rely on Thiessen to make suggestions and offer the wealth of his experience, this does not make the process any less trying. Playwrights may have discussed this situation hypothetically during the Garage meetings, but the Kaboom readings thrust it upon them in a way that could not be more real or immediate.

The first objective of the Playwrights Garage program is to foster each participant's individual voice and style as a playwright. Judging by the diversity of pieces presented at the Kaboom readings, the program succeeds. In the 2003-2004 year alone, we saw work that included a solo performance piece about racial identity (Althea Cunningham), a stylized reinterpretation of an ancient Greek narrative (Morgan Smith), and a realistic, intimate examination of marital tension (Dana Rayment). Thiessen's curriculum manages to encourage a freedom of content and style while teaching students how to view their own work carefully, critically, and rationally. The program instills standards without imposing creative restrictions. By encouraging each playwright's individuality, the Garage program prepares him or her to enter future development scenarios secure in the legitimacy of his or her own voice. Playwrights are better able both to articulate and to defend their artistic choices. On this point, the Garage is therefore an empowering experience, and playwrights who participate in it will have the opportunity and the means

to change the NPD system by taking this basic success with them.

In terms of the NPD discourse, the Playwrights Garage program's mandate and objectives are an attempt to alter, albeit in a subtle fashion, the priorities that currently leave playwrights underequipped when entering mainstream NPD, where they must compete with one another for the attention of theatres, but rarely find opportunities to learn the professional skills that will bring them more success. The Garage model grew out of a critique of NPD's status quo, but should be seen now as a factor in the long-term evolution of this status quo. The Playwrights Garage program is a recent phenomenon in Edmonton, but it has attracted national attention. "Workshop West has received calls from theatres and play development organizations across the country, interested in emulating it" (Alberta Playwrights Network Funding Application n.pag.). Its particular mix of training, mentorship, and workshop/staged reading, with a deliberate emphasis on playwright development rather than the more common product-oriented play development, is currently not duplicated elsewhere in the country. However, under the direct and dedicated leadership of another facilitator like Thiessen, the model may be picked up in other cities by other NPD programs in the coming years.

CHAPTER FOUR

Concluding with Broader Questions

One assumption I have carried forward with me in my thesis is that the body of Canadian plays we have today would not exist in the same way had it not been for the artists who first developed the workshop, the staged reading, and other development practices. Clearly, New Play Development is a Canadian tradition that continues to do valuable work in bringing Canadian plays to Canadian stages. However, I have also operated under another assumption: that it is possible, and necessary, to examine critically this discourse that has such a significant impact on emerging Canadian theatre artists. My examination leaves behind a number of larger questions that will continue to be considered and debated. These questions are primarily concerned with the direction in which NPD will evolve in the future.

What has prevented, and continues to prevent, sustained playwright development opportunities from becoming a significant and permanent feature on Edmonton's New Play Development landscape? Why was the Playwrights Garage in the position to be regarded as so innovative simply by emphasizing playwright development over play development? This question becomes even more interesting when we consider playwrights alongside their equivalents — such as composers — in other collaborative art forms. A composer, for example, does not regularly submit his or her work to a group of artists, including a conductor and a musical developer who specializes in

the process (neither of whom may be composers themselves), and ask for feedback about the effectiveness of the new work and how it might be made more "produceable." We would not necessarily assume that a composer could create his or her best material without having been thoroughly trained in the specific craft of composing, no matter how much experience he or she may have had working in other roles in music. We would not necessarily assume that by participating in the development of a new work, a composer receives a complete education in how to compose.

However, in relation to playwrights, it seems that these assumptions have become a part of the NPD discourse in Edmonton. Without the leadership of Vern Thiessen and his partnership with Workshop West Theatre and its Artistic Director, Ron Jenkins, the Playwrights Garage program would not have been established. Unfortunately it, too, has now gone on hiatus because Thiessen has stepped down from his role as coordinator. Without strong leadership from within the established playwriting community, will playwright development initiatives ever become a lasting part of NPD in Edmonton?

It seems clear that playwrights must take on this leadership role themselves. NPD serves several different interests, of which the playwrights' interest is only one. Established playwrights — especially those who not only are accomplished writers but also have the skills of a good mentor — are in the best position to instruct emerging playwrights how to "take responsibility for their own creative process: from initial idea, to contract, to development, to

first production, to publication, to future productions" (Thiessen "Risk Factors" 81). Playwright development has not been a priority within the current NPD discourse, and this is unlikely to change unless playwrights actively promote their development agenda.

What is the long-term benefit of the Playwrights Garage to NPD? I admit that because the example of the Garage is so recent, it is impossible to evaluate fully its successes and shortcomings. Through NPD, some playwrights discover that they are in fact not playwrights at all, and this does not necessarily indicate failure. In the case of the Garage playwrights, it is simply too soon to measure who will go on to a successful playwriting practice, and who will abandon the field. Many participants will fall somewhere between these two poles. However, participants' success to date is a good sign that the Garage will continue to pay dividends into the future. My hope is that those Garage playwrights who go on to work within NPD will collaborate confidently and clearly with other development practitioners, controlling their development processes and maintaining a community of support and advocacy.

In the future, I believe that NPD's path will increasingly be affected by the diversity of Canadian theatre artists and the potential expansion of development practices. This potential expansion is exciting, as are the increasing number of programs designed to encourage it. Nightswimming Theatre's Pure Research program, for example, provides resources for artists to explore a dramatic or aesthetic question in an open-ended research setting,

entirely free from the trappings of development (Home page). This is a program that enables artists to generate fresh new work and methods, and its success could in turn influence NPD's assumptions and practices.

In this thesis, I have focused on the traditional single-playwright model, but certainly there are many other types of play-making — with roots extending back into the mid-20th century and beyond — that have always been used parallel to the more conventional discourse I have discussed. Collectives, company-based pieces, works grounded in image, sound, or movement rather than text; I suspect that in the coming years, the mainstream discourse will adopt more of the practices of these divergent developmental methods, because these methods hold such potential for revitalization. Some of the Garage playwrights, like other emerging playwrights today, will probably be more successful making theatre through one or more of these complementary processes. I hope that the Garage playwrights, and other emerging playwrights, will find — or create — the form and the support structure best suited to their individual voices.

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APPENDIX A

Saturation Research

Because I have relied heavily on my own experiences within New Play Development for my thesis, I felt that it would be appropriate for me to provide a sense of the nature and scope of these experiences. Most recently, as an auditor, I attended and participated in the Playwrights Garage regular classroom sessions, February 2003 - February 2004, and rehearsals for staged readings during the Kaboom[4] Festival, February 2004.

During my undergraduate program, I took part in a variety of play development initiatives. While studying dramaturgy at the University of Regina, I participated in a number of workshops as a dramaturg, director, and actor. Through the University's Playwrights Reading Series, I performed in several staged readings, including those for AlterNatives by Drew Hayden Taylor and Chasing the Wind by James Misfeldt.

In 1999 and 2001, I volunteered as an intern at the Saskatchewan Playwrights' Centre's Spring Festival of New Plays. There, I was involved in multi-day workshops for Patriots Divided by Dennis Hunt, directed by Henry Woolf; and Comfort and Joy by Kelley Jo Burke, directed by Mary Vingoe, respectively. I also attended the Festival as an observer in 2004 as part of my thesis research.